**Location and Context**

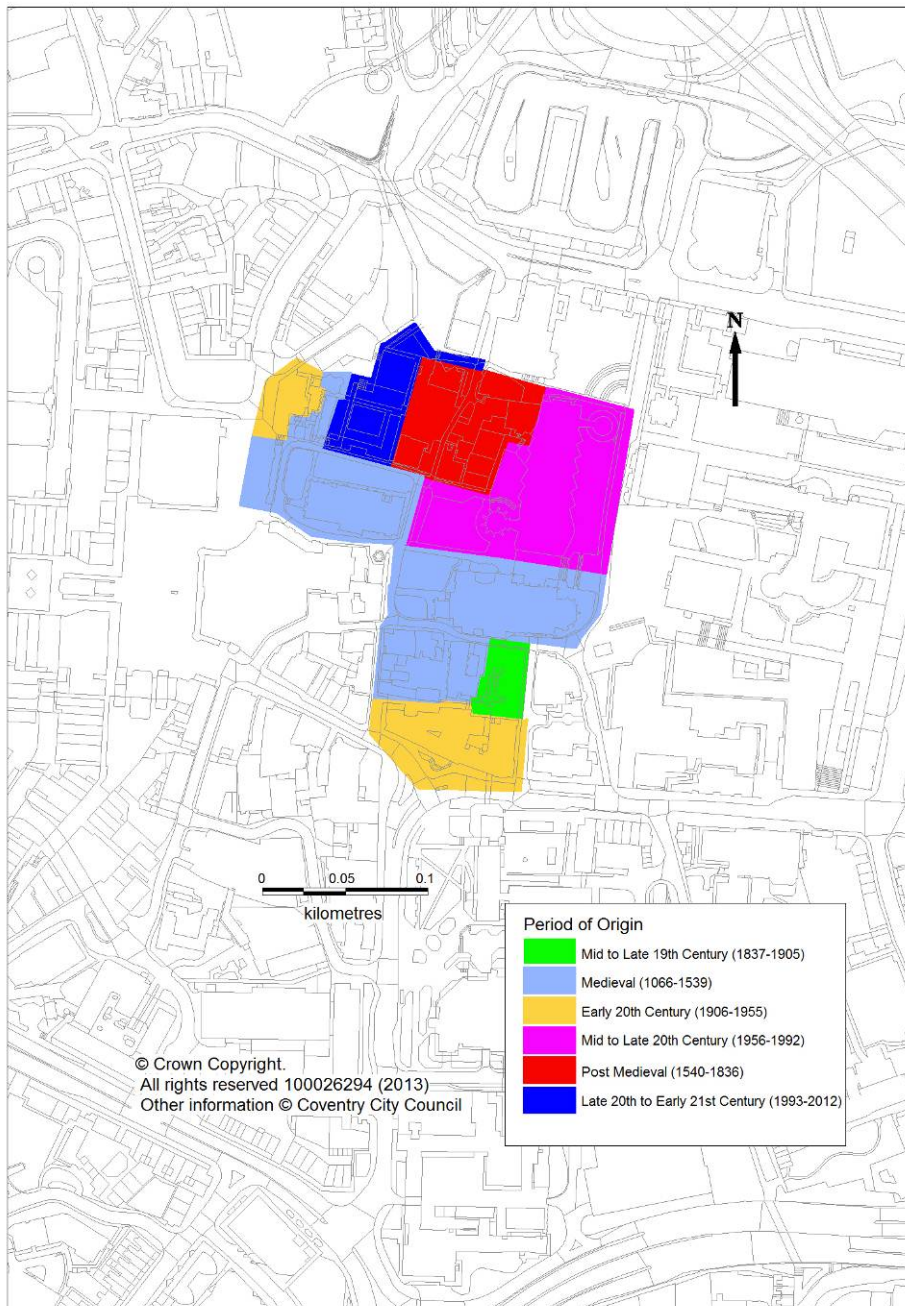
This area, often referred to as Hill Top, is the historic core of the city centre and is dominated by the medieval and modern Cathedrals of St. Michael and Holy Trinity Church. The area also includes a range of historic buildings dating from the medieval period to the early 20th century and the open spaces of the churchyards. As well as being an area of architectural importance it is also one of high archaeological significance. The Character Area is surrounded by a commercial area to the west and a civic area including Council offices and university buildings to the east.

**Heritage Designations in the Area**

Scheduled Ancient Monuments: 1  
Archaeological Constraint Areas: 1  
Listed Buildings: 12  
Locally Listed Buildings: 2  
Conservation Areas: 1  
Registered Parks and Gardens: 0

**Historic Development**

This area is the highest point in Coventry city centre and is known to have been a religious centre since at least the late Saxon period. Archaeological excavations on the site of the Norman St Mary's Benedictine Cathedral Priory identified the remains of an earlier church below it which is believed to be the Abbey founded in 1043 by Leofric, Earl of Mercia and his wife the Countess Godiva. Human remains found below this structure were radiocarbon dated and demonstrated that Christian burial had been taking place here since the 9<sup>th</sup> century and gave credence to the existence of St Osburg's 9<sup>th</sup> century nunnery which was previously regarded as a mere legend. It is now thought likely that Coventry was the site of an Anglo-Saxon minster and that Holy Trinity Church located on the top of the hill, to the south of the Priory, with its cruciform plan is the most likely candidate for the minster church. Recent excavations ahead of the extension of the Herbert Museum on Bayley Lane recovered Middle and Late Saxon pottery and give further support to this area being the site of Anglo-Saxon Coventry. As the Bayley Lane name suggests the incoming Norman Earl of Chester's built his castle to the south of Holy Trinity Church sometime in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. The castle would have extended from Broadgate in the west to Jordan Well in the east, but seems to have been relatively short lived and had disappeared by the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. The castle's chief surviving relic is St Michael's Cathedral which is thought to have started life as the castle chapel. The land released by the removal of the castle became the



heart of the booming medieval city as evidenced by the foundation of St Mary's Guildhall on Bayley Lane in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century. The wealth of the medieval city was invested in the repeated extension of the parish church and by the late-15<sup>th</sup> century St Michael's had grown to be one of the largest churches in England.

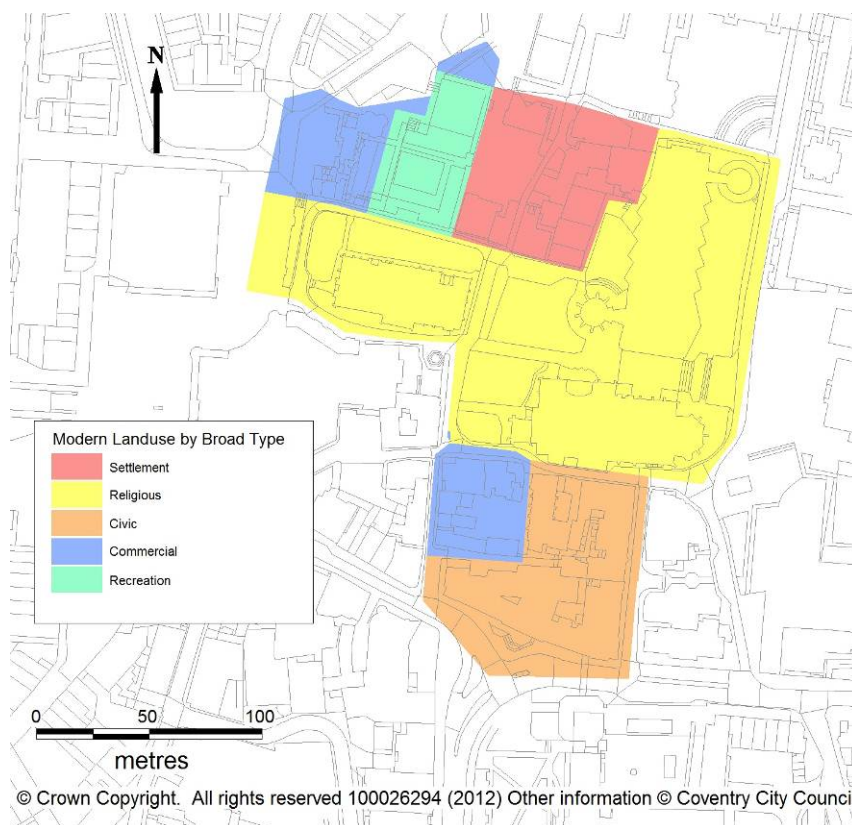
The Benedictine Priory was dissolved in 1545 and gradually demolished in the years that followed leaving a space in the city centre that remained empty until it was eventually filled by the Georgian houses along Priory Row in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Cathedral Priory's northwest tower survived and was used as a home until 1714 when the Bluecoat School was founded there, while the site of the nave became an extension to Holy Trinity's burial ground.

St Michael's became a cathedral with the creation of the Diocese of Coventry in 1918 and while other areas of the city underwent dramatic change in the inter-war years the Hill Top area remained almost unaffected.

The Cathedral was severely damaged in the air raids of November 1940 but by comparison with the destruction immediately to the west in Broadgate, the area had had a miraculous escape with relatively light damage to Holy Trinity church, the Guild Hall and the other historic buildings. The radical plans for the city centre that were under preparation from the late 1930's had always proposed the retention of the ecclesiastical buildings and the Guildhall and Council House while the remaining buildings were to be cleared. In the event the buildings that survived the war were retained and some bomb damaged properties were even restored. The significant addition to the area in the post-war period was Sir Basil Spence's new St Michael's Cathedral which was completed in 1962. Another more recent addition is the display in Priory Place of the remains of St Mary's Cathedral Priory that was excavated in c2000.



*The old and new Cathedrals of St. Michael*



### Modern Character

The Hill Top area is the most intact area of the pre-war city centre and this is reflected in its conservation area status. The historic street plan survives, as do many of the historic buildings dating from the medieval period through to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Where post-war additions have been made they are mostly of high quality and compliment the older fabric. There is an

eclectic mix of high architecture of varying periods, styles and building materials including timber-frame, sandstone and red brick.

The scale and style of the buildings and the palette of traditional materials in the area contrast with the rest of the city centre which overwhelmingly comprises of larger post-war buildings. There is also a contrast within the Character Area between narrow, winding, high-walled streets which give a sense of intimacy and create closed views, and formal open spaces such as the cathedral ruins and the Priory Gardens which enable views through spaces. The unplanned medieval streets juxtapose with the highly planned surroundings of the Phoenix Initiative development. There are few parking facilities and poor access for cars resulting in a tranquil atmosphere in comparison to the rest of the city. The cobbled streets, green churchyards and trees combine harmoniously with the architecture create a scenic and relaxing location.



*The medieval St. Mary's Guildhall,  
Bayley Lane*

### **Geology and Topography**

This area overlies sandstone. This character area and the surrounding location is relatively flat lying at 85m above sea level.